

Ex Libris – Provenience of old books

Christina, Queen of Sweden, who lived during the Thirty Years' War, was a very bibliophile person. She collected lots of books at her own library and had employed a lot of famous librarians of different origins. Gabriel Naudé, librarian of cardinal Mazarin, also worked for Christina. Many scholars of that time were associated to the library of Christina.

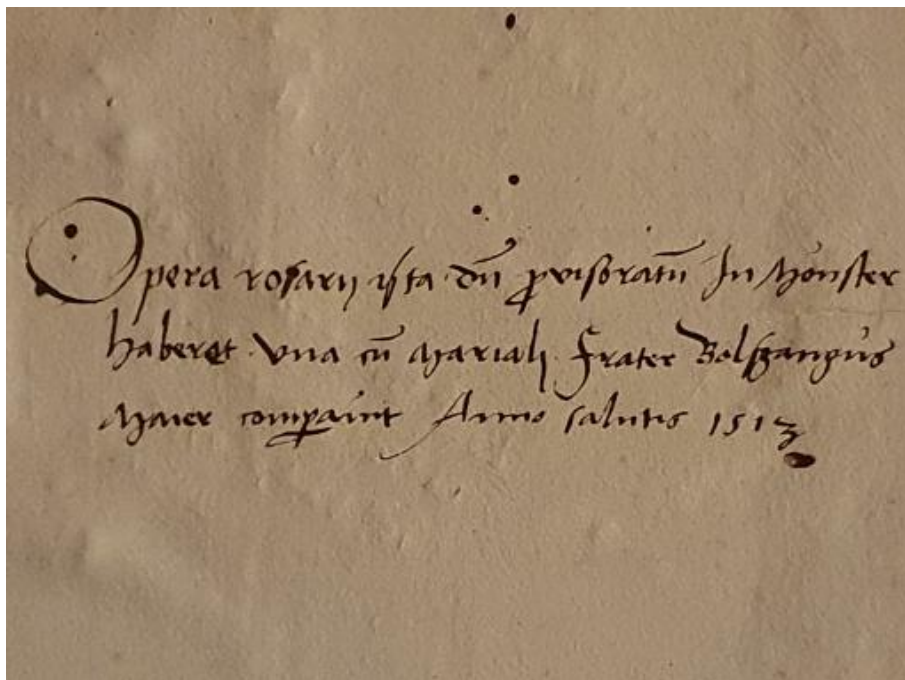
The heritage of her library has been a matter of research for quite a long time now. What happened to the library, after Christina resigned? A lot of books were transferred to the Library of the Holy See, but not all of them. Where did the others go? This question remains unanswered.

But this is a story, that really shows how important provenience of books can be. Who owned them, who held them in their hands? Through what course of fate did they finally find their way into thy possession? A question that requires to take a closer look at.

Some libraries use their own possession marks. The books are signed with a stamp or a written note that marks the ownership. These notes are often called “Ex libris”, which is Latin and stands for “out of the books”. It can be either such possession marks, mostly in the front matter of these books, or even some additional notes that someone made within the text itself.

Some librarians or private owners made a lot of efforts with that possession notes. Some made stickers with their own coat of armor on it, some wrote their names and a date on it, when they purchased the item, some made quite little notes. Within my own library I found some exciting Ex libris, that caused my attention.

First, there is an old buying note in a post-incunable printed in 1508:



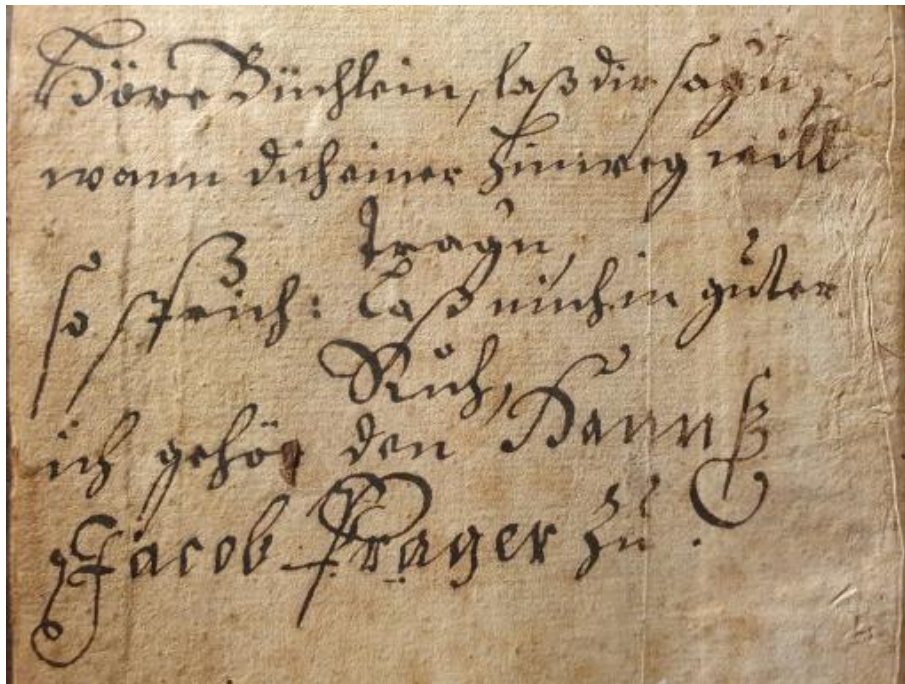
The text, as it is written, reads as follows:

"[...] Frater Wolfgang Maier comparit Anno salutis 1513."

So, a monk called Wolfgang Maier bought it in the "year of the lord" 1513.

That is amazing, just imagine: You can tell, that this book was sold in the year 1513, so more than 500 years ago. A time, to where most of us cannot even trace back their own ancestors. Notes of a long-forgotten past. That is what makes these books unique for me.

Another "Ex libris" entry that made me thinking, that really caught my eye, was a handwritten possession note, written in old German Kurrent¹, that tells a story of its own:



Nowadays, most of the German people cannot even read that handwritten font any more, although, this text is written in their own modern language. It says:

*"Höre Büchlein, laß dir sag'n,
wann dich einer hinweg will trag'n
so sprich: Laß mich in guter Ruh,
ich gehör den Hannß Jacob Prager zu."*

Translated, it reads like that:

„Listen, book, let you tell,
if someone wants to carry you away,
so, talk to them: Please leave me in peace,
I belong to Hanns Jacob Prager.”

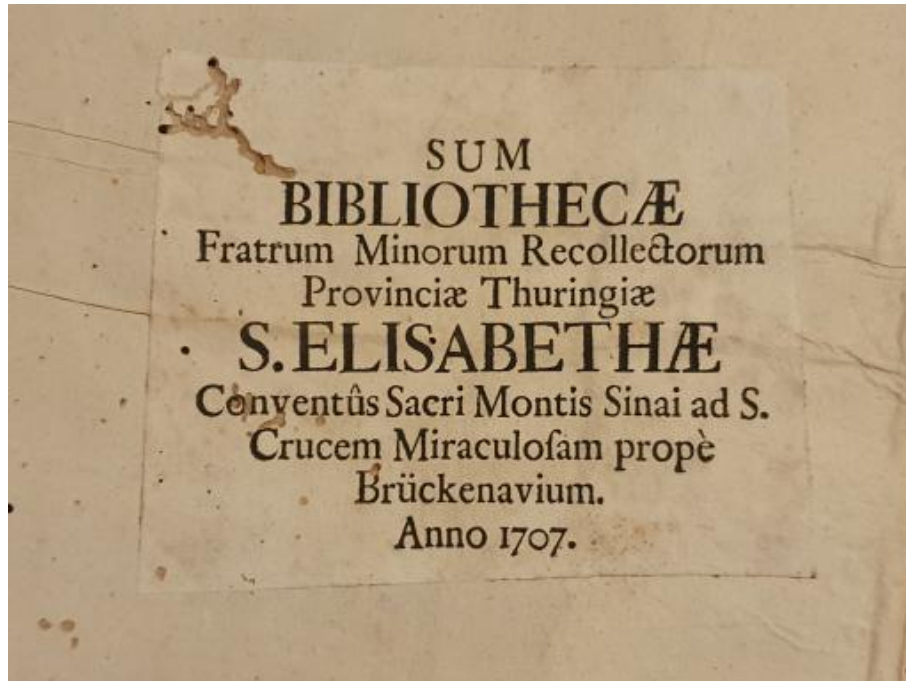
Unfortunately, there is no date on that Ex Libris, but, considering, how the old Kurrent font is written, that is most likely early or mid-18th century. So, this note tells you a lot of the story of that book itself.

These are some really nice examples of possession notes, but most of these possession notes are not that extraordinary at all. As mentioned before, some monastery libraries just made a

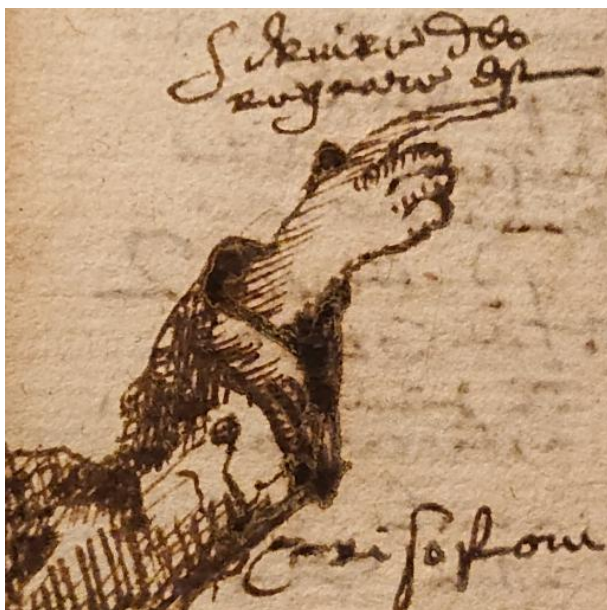
¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurrent>

stamp or a simple written note on the front matter of a book so that the book could be identified as their own. I also have some of these in my inventory, but they are not worth being shown.

A library sticker of an old monastery library I found on some of my old books, dated back to 1707, which is some kind of special, too, looks like this:



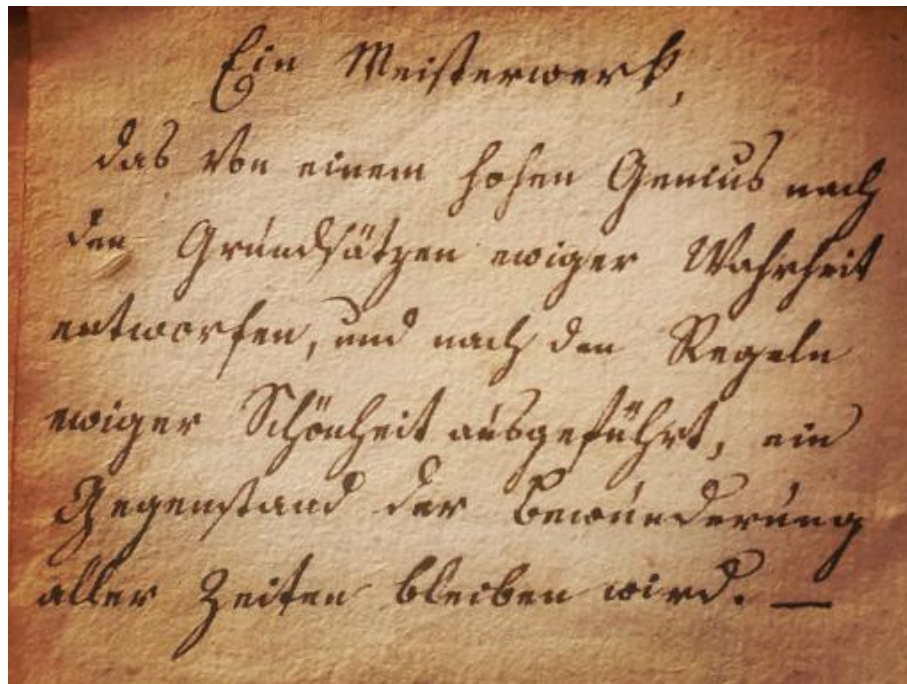
Not all of these “Ex libris” are possession notes, of course. Some really make a lot of interesting comments about the text of the books, make different amendments, sidenotes, remarks. A great example is a stretched finger that was attached to a manuscript written in mid-17th century:



I am not quite sure about it, but maybe, even the writer of that manuscript itself made this “sidenote”, this remark, to emphasize an important point he mentioned within his text. Mostly, these stretched fingers focus on important parts of the text itself and appear in some imprints or manuscripts of the late 16th or 17th century. Sometimes, even some printed versions of that stretched fingers occur within old books. In scientific context, these finger pointers are called “manicule²”.

But there are other Ex libris, as well. Within an old contemporary German edition (Second Edition, printed in Berlin in 1779) of “Nathan the Wise”, written by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, a fan of that book itself made a remarkable note, also written in German Kurrent:

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manicule>



“Ein Meisterwerk, das von einem hohen Genuß nach den Grundsätzen ewiger Wahrheit entworfen, und nach den Regeln ewiger Schönheit ausgeführt, ein Gegenstand der Bewunderung aller Zeiten bleiben wird.“

Translated into English, it reads as follows:

“A masterpiece, conceived by a high pleasure according to the principles of eternal truth, and executed according to the rules of eternal beauty, will remain an object of admiration for all time.”

These sidenotes make those books extraordinary. They are so much more than just the text itself, that you can get when you buy a modern age ISBN listed book from a bookstore. To finish this excursus for “Ex libris”, I like to show you an entire page of a contemporary sidenote to a book that was printed in 1504, the oldest book I own in my collection, so far, to leave it uncommented:



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